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## SOME CUSTOMS AND BELIEFS OF THE WINNEBAGO INDIANS.<sup>1</sup>

A YOUNG Winnebago girl, now a student at Hampton, Va., told me the following fragments of the folk-lore of her tribe. Having for years lived away from her early home in Nebraska, many traditions and legends that she had heard in childhood had escaped her memory, others could only in part be recalled. She well remembered the general belief of her people in various nature spirits. Offerings are constantly made to these deities of the clouds, the water, and the woods, to win their favor or to act as counter-charms against their malignant attacks. Tobacco and red feathers are especially prominent among the offerings, and a supply of the latter is usually to be found in the house of an Indian family that still keeps up ancient rites. No shrines are erected to the spirits, but gifts are left in particularly secluded places, oftentimes beside running water. Sacrifices of dogs are by no means uncommon. Such customs are not confined to the past, but exist to this day among many Indians living within a few miles of government schools. Some of the elders seriously object to the education of their children, seeing that it tends to destroy reverence for the sacred traditions and usages of the Indians.

"Thunders" are people who live in the clouds. They cause thunder by beating about or waving clubs which they carry. The lightning is caused by the opening of their eyes. When the rolling reverberations occur it is said that the thunders are going down under the earth. It is interesting here to notice that the Sioux say that thunder is caused by the noise made by the wings of crowds of turtle-doves, and that the lightning is due to their winking. The Sioux name for the turtle-dove is wa-kin-ya-la, and thunder is wa-kin. According to Sioux mythology, a thunderstorm will be caused by killing a turtle-dove. The thunders are great enemies of the water-spirits, beings who dwell in large bodies of water or in mountains or in the cliffs bordering great streams such as the Missouri River. When dull reverberations are heard, it is thought that the thunder-folk are pursuing the water-spirits, hunting them in their far retreats. When one is struck by lightning it is caused by one of the thunders striking him with a club. Offerings are made to the thunders to propitiate them. I knew once in early spring, during a violent thunderstorm, the first of the season, of a lad being sent to place tobacco in a secluded spot as a propitiatory offering to

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the thunders to win their favor for his family. A ring of grass is sometimes seen on the plains or hillsides, that is apparently beaten down and lies flat and dried against the green background. Such rings are supposed to be caused by the thunders dancing in a circle during a storm.

The water-spirits are thought to be immense creatures with horns. Their subterranean abodes are said to be very beautiful, sometimes carved out of shining white clay. They come on fair, bright days to sun themselves when there is no danger of the hostile thunders finding them. Sometimes water-spirits leave their beautiful underground mansions and are incarnated as men and women. One old medicine woman now living is very generally believed to be one of these incarnations. She had been the wife of a water-spirit during her previous existence. He was enraged at her leaving him to become a human being, and at the time of her birth with his hand struck her an unseen blow across the eyes which left dark marks below the eyes and on the temple, which she carries to this day. Those who know of her dual nature often notice and mention this mark of vengeance dealt by her water-spirit husband. Nor was this all of his jealous revenge. In time the child bearing the dark bluish marks about her eyes grew up and married an Indian of her tribe. She had several children. Her favorite, a pretty little girl, was one day stung by an adder and died almost immediately. Every one believed that this was the method taken by the former husband to call to his own world the favorite child of the wife who had long ago deserted him to dwell among men.

There is among these Indians a firm belief in tree or wood-spirits. Such a spirit is described as a smallish black animal, with a very round face and with glittering eyes. A child with an unusually fat round face will be said to be "Wän-kän-chu-ne-ska," that is, like a wood-spirit. My informant said that as a child she thought of the tree-spirit as a dark, cat-like animal. These creatures are spirits and yet at times materialize themselves so as to be visible to man. But it is certain death to behold the much feared tree-spirit. It is less disastrous to have a tree-spirit gaze upon you than for you to see it. But to have it look upon one may cause the person's death, and certainly bodes disaster of some sort. It is even most unfortunate to have a tree-spirit think of you. If, as the Indians say, "his thought reaches you," you will surely be sick. If the medicine man tells one who is ill that his sickness is caused by the evil influence of a wood-spirit, proper offerings or sacrifices should at once be made to restore health and to avert sickness from the house.

To dream of these spirits presages misfortune. If one be a parent, perhaps his unlucky dream foretells the death of his children. Even

young children are in terror if the tree-spirit appears to them in their dreams. The usual gifts of tobacco, red feathers, etc., are made to placate these spirits and to ward off the evil foretold by their appearance in sleep. If the dream is unusually striking or terrible (as in nightmare), even a dog is sometimes sacrificed to win the favor of the wood-deities.

If, unawares, one disturb a tree that is occupied by one of these sylvan deities, punishment is likely to be visited upon the offender. It sometimes happens that a man in felling a tree accidentally injures himself, when his friends say that probably the trouble was sent by an unseen spirit whose tree had been molested. Some years ago a man one evening came in from hunting in the woods. He was rather famous for his skill as a hunter, but this day had been unusually fortunate even for him. He threw down his game, came into the tent, and sat with his family in a circle about the fire in the middle of the tepee. Suddenly the flap of the latter was pushed aside and a stranger entered. He was dressed in black, an unusual thing for an Indian, and no one knew him. He passed on one side of the fire, to the place where the fortunate hunter sat, almost opposite the entrance of the tepee, and took his hand as if to shake hands. The hunter immediately fell back as if dead. The dark stranger disappeared without speaking. After a while the man was "brought to" by his friends. He had been unconscious, and it was with difficulty that he recovered. Both he and his friends believed that the swoon was caused by the influence of a wood-spirit. It was surmised that the latter had assumed the form of a man and for some reason had come to call the hunter to his own world, but had failed in his purpose.

Some peculiarly large tree, or one conspicuous on account of standing isolated in an exposed place, is held sacred as being the residence of a wood-spirit. An extremely large cottonwood tree which stands beside the Omaha Creek in Nebraska has long been considered as holy. At one time it was known to contain wild honey, but none of the inhabitants of the neighborhood attempted to rifle the great tree of its stores lest the deity residing in it should inflict a severe penalty for meddling with its sacred precincts.

A special spirit presides over and generally causes disease, and it is this spirit that must be sought and appeased when there is illness. A child was ill, and to cure it, as well as to prevent the disease from attacking several other children in the family, the mother slew a dog. She carried the dead animal to a brook beside which she placed it. All the children who were well had been ordered to attend her, each bearing a handful of the mystic red feathers and some tobacco. First the feathers were scattered over the sacrificed

dog, then the tobacco strewn over the feathers, which completed the rite. In cases where a dog is sacrificed it is a rigid rule that its death-blow must be so sure and strong that it shall die without howling even a single time.

The medicine man when trying to exorcise the spirit of disease scatters his tobacco, feathers, or what not, repeating meantime prayers. The latter are in part spontaneous appeals, in part formulæ in ancient dialect, or as my Winnebago friend said, "in old Indian," handed down by tradition from one medicine man to another. Young people of to-day only partially understand these ancient formulæ. At the time of a birth the medicine man is often summoned to pray and to make prognostications about the life and career of the new-born child.

There must be considerable in the thought and belief of the Winnebagos that bears upon the doctrine of the transmigration of souls. I have had too limited opportunity for investigation to draw any general conclusions, but fragments of mythology, communicated by the young woman already mentioned, convince me that there must be an interesting field for work among the tribe upon this subject. Certain ones of their medicine men are believed to have lived upon earth previous to their present existence. It would seem as if their magical powers were in part due to an accumulated strength derived from having lived before. The Indians in speaking of the subject say, "some people have to live over again." I understand that the medicine man or woman who is believed to be "living over again" is one whose first life on earth was good. Fireflies are said to be incarnations of people who lead bad lives and who after death had to "die over again." After this second death such persons reappear on earth as fireflies. The Winnebago name for these insects is "wa-ru-ha," which interpreted signifies "movers." Certain roots, for example Indian potatoes (probably a species of *Ipomœa*) and Indian turnips (*Psoralea esculenta*), used by the Indians as food, are not dug during the summer months, the time when the fireflies happen to be seen. The Indians say the roots are "moving" at this time, and should be left unmolested.

The old people do not like to tell their stories after the spring opens. The children are told that they would see snakes if they should listen to tales during warm weather.

*Fanny D. Bergen.*